

**THE AMERICAN CREDO: A
CONTRIBUTION TOWARD
THE INTERPRETATION OF THE
NATIONAL MIND; PP.1-189**

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The American Credo: A Contribution toward the Interpretation of the National Mind; pp.1-189
by George Jean Nathan & H. L. Mencken

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THE AMERICAN CREDO

A Contribution Toward the Interpretation
of the National Mind

- a jocosital approach...

BY

GEORGE JEAN NATHAN

and H. L. MENCKEN



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PREFACE

I

The superficial, no doubt, will mistake this little book for a somewhat laborious attempt at jocosity. Because, incidentally to its main purpose, it unveils occasional ideas of so inordinate an errorneousness that they verge upon the ludicrous, it will be set down a piece of spoofing, and perhaps denounced as in bad taste. But all the while that main purpose will remain clear enough to the judicious. It is, in brief, the purpose of clarifying the current exchange of rhetorical gas-bombs upon the subject of American ideals and the American character, so copious, so cocksure and withal so ill-informed and inconclusive, by putting into plain propositions some of the notions that lie at the heart of those ideals and enter into the very substance of that character. "For as he thinketh in his heart," said Solomon, "so is he." It is a saying, obviously, that one may easily fill with fan-

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tastic meanings, as the prevailing gabble of the mental healers, New Thinkers, efficiency engineers, professors of scientific salesmanship and other such mountebanks demonstrates, but nevertheless it is one grounded, at bottom, upon an indubitable fact. Deep down in every man there is a body of congenital attitudes, a corpus of ineradicable doctrines and ways of thinking, that determines his reactions to his ideational environment as surely as his physical activity is determined by the length of his *tibiæ* and the capacity of his lungs. These primary attitudes, in fact, constitute the essential man. It is by recognition of them that one arrives at an accurate understanding of his place and function as a member of human society; it is by a shrewd reckoning and balancing of them, one against another, that one forecasts his probable behaviour in the face of unaccustomed stimuli.

All the arts and sciences that have to do with the management of men in the mass are founded upon a proficient practice of that sort of reckoning. The practical politician, as every connoisseur of ochlocracy knows, is not a man who seeks to inoculate the innumerable caravan of voters with

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new ideas; he is a man who seeks to search out and prick into energy the basic ideas that are already in them, and to turn the resultant effervescence of emotion to his own uses. And so with the religious teacher, the social and economic reformer, and every other variety of popular educator, down to and including the humblest press-agent of a fifth assistant Secretary of State, moving-picture actor, or Y. M. C. A. boob-squeezing committee. Such adept professors of conviction and enthusiasm, in the true sense, never actually teach anything new; all they do is to give new forms to beliefs already in being, to arrange the bits of glass, onyx, horn, ivory, porphyry and corundum in the mental kaleidoscope of the populace into novel permutations. To change the figure, they may give the medulla oblongata, the cerebral organ of the great masses of simple men, a powerful diuretic or emetic, but they seldom, if ever, add anything to its primary supply of fats, proteids and carbohydrates.

One speaks of the great masses of simple men, and it is of them, of course, that the ensuing treatise chiefly has to say. The higher and more delicately organized tribes and sects of men are susceptible to no such ready anatomizing, for the body of be-

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✓ beliefs upon which their ratiocination grounds itself is not fixed but changing, and not artless and crystal-clear but excessively complex and obscure. It is, indeed, the chief mark of a man emerged from the general that he has lost most of his original certainties, and is full of a scepticism which plays like a spray of acid upon all the ideas that come within his purview, including especially his own. One does not become surer as one advances in knowledge, but less sure. No article of faith is proof against the disintegrating effects of increasing information; one might almost describe ✓ ✓ ✓ the acquirement of knowledge as a process of disillusion. But among the humbler ranks of men who make up the great bulk of every civilized people the increase of information is so slow and so arduous that this effect is scarcely to be discerned. If, in the course of long years, they gradually lose their old faiths, it is only to fill the gaps with new faiths that restate the old ones in new terms. Nothing, in fact, could be more commonplace than the observation that the crazes which periodically ravage the proletariat today are, in the main, no more than distorted echoes of delusions cherished centuries ago. The fundamental religious ideas of the